

April 3, 2022
Fifth Sunday in Lent

“In His Church”

Luke 20:9-20

At a very basic level this parable of the wicked tenants Jesus tells in our Gospel reading today does not apply to us. It is clearly directed at the Jewish religious leaders of first-century Jerusalem. Christ’s point is that these leaders have hijacked the temple and the worship therein and claimed it for themselves, specifically that by their own obedience and righteousness they believe they have seized salvation and the favor of God. But the fruit of faithful humility and love God desires is completely absent from their piety.

I do not believe the scribes and the chief priest understood Jesus’ reference to Psalm 118 nor His claim to Messiahship, so that’s not what gets them so upset. What they do understand is Jesus’ is predicting they will be overthrown by God and replaced by others. And the reason for this overthrow is quite insulting; it’s because they’re being complete morons. Selfish, self-righteous, rebellious morons, but morons nonetheless.

I mean, look at the parable. The tenants are idiots. They completely ignore the reality of the situation. They are workers in somebody else’s vineyard and their very purpose in life is to foster the bearing of fruit for the vineyard owner. And it’s quite obvious from the parable’s ending that the owner is a powerful guy fully capable of massacring the workers if they rebel against him. Yet inexplicably the workers believe the vineyard is theirs to do with as they please. They despise those sent to receive the fruit. When the son is sent, they idiotically reason that if they kill the son somehow the inheritance will be theirs—that makes no sense whatsoever!

And in reality the parable is taking place as Jesus speaks it. This takes place during Holy Week. The Son of God stands before them and this parable is a call for them to humble themselves, repent and render true faithful obedience to their Creator, but they will not. They will kill the Son, thinking that will secure their position as leaders of Yahweh’s church. In reality they will guarantee their demise as their precious temple will be completely destroyed less than 40 years later under God’s judgment, and the new church founded on the cornerstone of the resurrected Christ will be the vineyard that bears much fruit for God’s eternal kingdom.

In that truth this parable can somewhat be extended into the present day. We are the others to whom God has entrusted His vineyard, His church. **HIS** church.

I emphasize HIS church for us because if you boil it all down, what was the mistake of the wicked tenants? They thought the vineyard was theirs, not God’s. What was the great sin of the scribes and chief priests? They thought the church and temple was theirs, not God’s. Thus a grave mistake of which we should be wary is thinking that our church is OUR church and not HIS church. And making that mistake might be easier than you think.

I guess this especially applies to pastor as the religious leaders of today. There is no shortage of pastors who lead their flocks into false doctrine or those who simply abuse their authority and lord themselves over congregations. So you need to keep an eye on your pastor.

But I’m not preaching to pastors. I’m preaching to the church and warning you not to think His your is your church.

I mean, what is Christ’s church? It is the gathering of God’s people together around His wonderful Gospel gifts of His Word and His Sacraments. This is why Lutheran doctrine terms Word and Sacrament as “marks of the church.” These are also called the “means of grace” because it is through these that Christ distributes those Gospel gifts of forgiveness, life and

salvation. Christ is the head of this church, the risen Son, victorious King, who rules with grace and mercy over those whom He has called to faith by the Holy Spirit.

In this church Jesus has given the Gospel command “Do this, in remembrance of me” regarding the Holy Supper. The Christian Church through the centuries has gathered regularly for this sacred meal to receive the forgiveness of sins therein. Yet a multitude of folks spurn the gathering and the meal as unnecessary and optional. The direction of Christ and historical Christianity is clear, but they say “That’s not necessary in MY church. I just need that personal relationship with Jesus—a relationship I get to define, not Jesus.” Jesus was defining part of the relationship when He said, “Do this, in remembrance of me”!

Or let’s talk doctrine. We call ourselves “Lutheran” because we subscribe to a set of teachings that have been painstakingly researched, debated, studied and drawn forth from Holy Scripture. “Lutheran” doctrine is synonymous with “Christian” doctrine for the Lutheran. These are the doctrines of CHRIST’S church. Yet how many Lutherans easily disagree with established doctrine when it rubs against a worldly way of thinking? Yes, we’ve seen it happen en masse in other denominations, but it happens every day in the LCMS. Divorce, living together, supporting the church, sharing the Gospel, even something as basic as forgiving one another—Christians don’t want to do it Christ’s way. No it’s MY doctrine, based on how I think and feel, not on God’s Holy Word revealed to HIS church. So I can do what I want, forgive only those who I think have earned it, and live life in the Gospel according to ME.

It should be obvious, but I’ll go ahead and point out that clear-cut sin is always usurping God’s authority over you and inserting your own. Sin is pretty much always a form of idolatry and idolatry is simply making a god out of that which isn’t God...which obviously isn’t part of His church. If you’re comfortable in sin and not repenting of it, but rather embracing it, you most certainly are worshipping at some other altar.

My point is this: Jesus’ parable clearly paints the scribes and chief priest as utter morons denying the reality that the vineyard, the church, belongs to God. If, like them, we stand in His church but refuse to acknowledge our proper place before Him and instead stand in rebellion against His will for us, it ends badly, very badly. And the truth is that if we stand opposed to our God today we’re even dumber than those Jews.

We know the truth about the guy telling the parable. He is THE Son of God who was killed as according to the parable, but rose again in victory. This Son has established His church and His will is our salvation. His rule has been established forever and we’re going to stand in rebellion against Him for the pleasures of a short, broken, earthly life that ends in a matter of decades? How dumb is that? How foolish is that?

But it’s not just Christ’s authority, it’s His very nature that commands our submission to be members of HIS church and no other. Jesus is love, grace and mercy. His death at the hands of the Jewish leaders was by His own design to save you! It is the highest mercy that you should be counted among the workers in HIS vineyard, because the vineyard is His church and His church is the everlasting kingdom of God. Sometimes it doesn’t look like it this side of the judgment, but that is the truth according to God.

The ultimate foolishness in usurping God’s church for your own is the reality of death. You’re the one who dies, so can any belief, reasoning or doctrine you manufacture of yourself stand in death? Of course not. The church of YOU will die with you. That church has zero promise in the face of death.

Christ's church reigns over death because Christ has defeated death! His promise to His church is simple: "Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." Don't be a foolish worker thinking that without the Son you somehow inherit the vineyard.

Instead, live in your baptism into the Son's death to sin and resurrection to righteousness and glory. Live in His church, His truth, His Word and rejoice in all the blessings He continually pours out on those who don't rebel against Him, but submit joyfully to His unending love.

Amen.